

The J.D. Giddings Legacy and Homes

“...to J.D. Giddings, more than any other man, must be given the credit of having founded the City of Brenham. Primarily, it owes its very existence to him...”

The History of Brenham and Washington County, Mrs. R.E. Pennington, 1915

Jabez Deming (J.D.) Giddings spent his first years on his family's farm in Herrick, Pennsylvania. He had twelve siblings but he looked up to his older brother, Giles, who was two years older. In 1835, at age 23, Giles followed his dreams to Texas -- then a part of Mexico. His letters home were full of exciting adventures, and he often shared his love for Texas and his fellow “Texians,” as they called themselves.

Giles' patriotism for Texas drove him to enlist in Sam Houston's army in early 1836, just before the determining Battle of San Jacinto. Even though Texas won her independence in the battle, Giles Giddings lost his life.

But Giles' passion for Texas adventures had fascinated his younger brother. J.D. dutifully fulfilled his parents' requirement to get a college degree close to home. Then he left for the new Republic of Texas to claim the land grant due to Giles' heirs for his service in the Texian Army.

J.D. arrived in Texas in 1838 at 24 years of age. He loved the new country so much that he settled in Hickory Grove, which is now Brenham. He immediately went to work in Independence as a teacher, but also found himself fighting Indians when needed. True to Giles' letters, there was plenty of adventure in Texas and J.D. barely escaped death in a few Indian skirmishes. He became skilled in battle.

In 1840 J.D. organized, planned and led the building of a new school that served children and adults. The same year he was elected the Washington County District Court Clerk, and he also started law school. While studying law, he became Postmaster of Mount Vernon, near Independence.

Volunteers were needed in 1843 to stop raids from the Mexican army and rescue prisoners held in Mexico. J.D. answered the call, serving as Orderly Sergeant of Volunteers in Somervell's Campaign. When the band of soldiers disbursed J.D. returned to Brenham, narrowly escaping the horrible fate of the famous Mier Expedition.

1843 was also the year J.D. completed his stately home north of Brenham. It was his wedding gift to his future bride, Ann Tarver, the sister of Edmund T. Tarver, the Texas Republic's Attorney General. J.D. and Ann were married in 1844 when they moved into the new home, now known as the Giddings Wilkin House Museum.

The same year, 1844, marked several milestones for J.D. and for Washington County:

- ❖ He was admitted to the State Bar of Texas, built his law office, and started his law practice.
- ❖ He traveled the county, campaigning for and winning the Washington County Seat for Brenham.
- ❖ He organized the region's first Methodist Church and led the Sunday school program there until his death.
- ❖ He established the region's first Masonic Academy and the first Mason Lodge where he served as Grand Master most of his life.

J.D.'s youngest brother, Dewitt Clinton (Clint) came to Brenham in 1852, after studying law in Pennsylvania. Clint was admitted to the Texas Bar in 1853 and became the junior partner in J.D.'s Brenham law firm, which was renamed "Giddings & Giddings."

By 1855 J.D. was concerned with the community's lack of higher education, as his oldest children were approaching college age. He became a charter member of the board of trustees of Soule University in Chappell Hill, one of the first colleges in Texas. He and Clint led much of the planning for the school's construction and operation.

After a few years of working as a team, J.D. and Clint Giddings conceived a revolutionary plan that would lay the foundation for Brenham's success. In 1856 they established the Washington County Railroad Company and began campaigning for community support, state support, and partnership with the new Houston and Texas & Central Railroad Company.

The plan seemed like a far-fetched fantasy, as few people in Texas had ever seen a railroad or a train. But the Giddings brothers eloquently persuaded the community, telling of benefits they had seen first-hand in New England railroad towns.

Clint had worked as a railroad engineer while attending school in Pennsylvania and J.D. had the political connections needed. With their expertise and their extensive personal investments, the community rallied behind the Giddings brothers. Many county residents gave land for right-of-way, and many loaned slaves and oxen teams for labor. Any type of investment rewarded citizens with stock and/or roles in the company.

During the next few years, the Giddings brothers were consumed with overseeing the Railroad's construction and running their law practice. Having proven themselves as one of the most effective law teams in the state, they had many high-level clients including the State of Texas.

It was only natural that J.D. and Clint Giddings were the first to see the need to incorporate Brenham as a city. They completed this body of legal work in 1858, while the Railroad was under construction.

The Washington County Railroad was finally finished to Brenham in early 1861. A grand celebration marked a new era of rail service between Brenham, Houston and Galveston, with the promise of new markets for the abundant products made in Washington County. The esteemed Giddings Brothers were celebrated as visionary trailblazers for the community.

At the same time, the Civil War began and most Texas men went off to fight for the Confederacy, including Clint. J.D. stayed behind, serving as the Confederate Receiver at Brenham, and important role due to the new Railroad. J.D. also conducted a confidential mission for Governor Lubbock during the war.

The Railroad brought a flood of people and prosperity to Washington County and it was one of the few Southern communities that flourished during the war. For the first time, fast transportation and communications were available from the Gulf coast to Austin, making Brenham the important link to the capitol and the western frontier.

Many travelers arrived in Brenham daily, some settling in the area and others moving westward by horse or stage coach. The county's population grew larger than Houston and Austin combined. Local products were sold in Houston, Galveston and around the world via Galveston's seaport. Local manufacturers, ranchers and plantation owners grew wealthy.

At the close of the war, J.D. and Clint were the first to see the need for managing the county's considerable affluence brought by the Railroad. In 1866 they opened Washington County's first bank, Giddings & Giddings. They also continued to operate their law firm. By now, they were among the wealthiest men in Texas and they were known throughout the state.

J.D. went to Austin in 1866 to serve in the first Texas House of Representatives after the Civil War. He resisted living away from home for so long, but he was compelled by his sense of duty to his beloved Texas. While serving, he acted as chairman of the Texas Judiciary Committee.

When a large part of Brenham was burned by Federal soldiers in 1866, Governor Throckmorton appointed J.D. to lead the Texas Congressional Committee that investigated and reported the incident. His captivating report was read in a joint session of Congress and distributed widely, influencing national politics.

A yellow fever epidemic struck Washington County in 1868, killing many citizens. After learning that the deadly disease was carried by mosquitos, J.D. decided to remove his family from low-lying areas where mosquitos live and breed. He bought a 320 acre tract one mile south of Brenham, on the highest hill in Washington County.

Construction of his new palatial home began in 1869. The mansion was completed in 1870 when the family moved in. At the same time, their first home was sold to the John Bush Wilkin family, who owned it until 1945. Ever since, the original home has been known as the Giddings Wilkin House.

While building his new home, J.D. started another project important to history. He was the primary stock holder and board member of Houston & Texas Central Railroad (H&TC), and he arranged for H&TC to buy The Washington County Railroad. The 1869 transaction was for the purpose of extending the tracks from Brenham to Austin. This would complete the route all the way from Galveston to the State capitol, which was greatly needed. Once again the Giddings brothers led the project and oversaw construction.

By 1870 the tracks reached about halfway to Austin and it became apparent that a town was needed in that remote area, to service trains and provide railroad access for nearby towns. As the new town's construction began, it was named "Giddings" after the popular founders of the Railroad.

The Giddings brothers established a bank in the new town of Giddings, to boost the town's economy. In 1871 residents started moving into Giddings and it later became the seat of Lee County.

The tracks finally reached Austin in late 1871 and Governor Hamilton hosted a grand event to celebrate. About 5,000 residents and visitors crowded into the city to get their first glimpses of a train. For many years after, Brenham and the Giddings brothers continued to be recognized for their important contribution to the State's enhanced transportation, communications and economy.

Always passionate about education, J.D. helped to form a state committee in 1876 that bought a plantation near Hempstead and established Prairie View A&M University on the site.

In 1878, J.D. died at age 64. Just outside his gate, he was accidently thrown from his horse-drawn carriage. His wife, Ann, died in 1907 at the Giddings Mansion. They were both buried in Brenham's Prairie Lea Cemetery.

Ann and J.D. had eight children, but only three survived to become adults. Their only surviving daughter, Mary Louise Giddings, married Heber Stone in 1879. He was an attorney, and the son of Galveston's mayor, Dewitt Clinton Stone.

Heber had served as County Attorney of Brown County before starting a private law practice. He served two terms as a Texas Senator, and was Chairman of Washington County's Democratic Executive Committee.

In 1891 Heber bought the controlling interest of Brenham's First National Bank that had been established one year earlier. He was named president and led the bank to become one of the most reputable banks in Texas.

Heber also had controlling interests in many private companies in Texas and Mexico. Like the Giddings men, he amassed a fortune and died a wealthy man.

Heber and Mary Louise Stone lived in the Giddings family home their entire married lives, as did their descendants for the next few generations. The large home has since been known as the Giddings Stone Mansion.

Heber died in 1906 and Mary Louise followed him in 1928. They are both interred in Brenham's Prairie Lea Cemetery.